

Help Awaits On The Outside

By RACHEL GOTTLIEB
Courant Staff Writer

March 23 2005

CHESHIRE -- When Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez on Tuesday offered 40 prisoners help in finding housing or a job when they're released from the Manson Youth Institution, it made a deep impression on Chris Chapman.

"It helped me to know that he's concerned," said Chapman, who used to attend Wish Elementary School in Hartford but has spent most of his life since sixth grade behind bars. "A lot of people are just watching us die. Jail is a big business with a lot of people profiting off it. It felt good to know that the mayor cares."

Reflecting on his life, Chapman said he was a good student in elementary school until he realized that getting arrested brought him "fame" among his peers. "I got more love for doing bad than for doing good. It seemed like everybody applauded my dirty work."

Eric Crawford, the city school district's violence prevention specialist, said that changing the youth culture that offers more respect for toughness than for academic achievement is the toughest challenge the city faces.

The street violence sending city youngsters to emergency rooms and to the morgue was behind the mayor's visit to Manson Tuesday. Of the 635 inmates aged 14 to 20 who are incarcerated here, 130 - more than 20 percent - are from Hartford and most of them will return to the city's streets within a year or so. Chapman expects to be released a year from May.

Perez wanted to hear from prisoners about what the city might be able to do to help them succeed when they're released - and to gently put them on notice that he's paying attention to the direction they're taking.

"I didn't tell them this," Perez said after his meeting with the young men, "but I'm going to track them."

That shouldn't come as a surprise to some of these inmates. In his remarks to the group, he mentioned that he and Crawford visited some of them in their homes before they were arrested on weapons charges. Crawford and Perez are making their way through a list of

more than 100 boys identified as headed for trouble and visiting them and their parents to let them know there are people who are willing to help them.

Chapman wasn't one of those who got a home visit from Perez because he hasn't spent much time at home. He's 20 now and says that since he was 11, he's spent more time in prison or detention than at home.

But Chapman said he was deeply comforted by Perez's visit. Perez took with him a list of numbers for inmates to call for help with housing, education and finding a job when they're released. The warden said he'll distribute the list to each one of them when they're released.

"Whatever numbers they've got, I'll call," Chapman said.

Perez made it clear to his audience that he wasn't offering to save their lives, but rather looking for ways to help them salvage their own lives. One inmate complained about police targeting minorities, for example. Perez agreed that he's been a victim of racial profiling himself, with police stopping him as he drove through several suburban towns.

"If you're taking care of business right, the chances of being harassed, the chances of getting beat up, the chances of going to jail are reduced," Perez said.

Perez, a former gang member, talked about his own life, how it took him 10 years after high school graduation before he found a way to go to college and how he gets to work at 7:30 each morning six days a week and then works a full day. He talked about his brothers who got caught up in drugs and their cycle of incarceration and failure.

"Every time you get a break, you've got to make good on it and every day is a break," Perez said. "When you get out, we're going to give you people to call. You're going to have to make the call."

Perez asked the inmates if they had a plan for their next step and Crawford told them that they should use some of their ample time behind bars to develop a plan. But some of the inmates expressed bewilderment about how to get through life with a record.

Alvin Torres, 18, said he has two children and he wants to be a "responsible parent." He was in ninth grade, he said, when his first child was born. "I panicked. I wanted to provide all the necessities. I went out on the street selling weed. I thought I was being responsible. I sold weed to someone under cover. It's going to be hard now because I'm a convicted felon."

Perez conceded that it will be harder now with a record. But he said that it will only get harder as the men add new convictions to their rap sheets.

Crawford encouraged the men to think about ways that they can work for themselves such as saving their money to buy lawnmowers and starting landscaping businesses.

He and Perez both told the men to expect plenty of rejection. Even with a college degree, Crawford said, it took him 10 interviews before he landed a job.

The inmates didn't make concrete requests for help other than to say that they're worried about finding work. Perez and Crawford said they weren't surprised by the youths' reticence to speak in a group and they asked the warden to have the men write to him with suggestions for ways city and school officials can help them and other children in Hartford.

Copyright 2005, [Hartford Courant](#)

Reprinted with permission of The Hartford Courant.